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Viewing cable 07PARIS3237, FRENCH MFA PUTS SARKOZY'S JULY 10-11 NORTH AFRICA

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07PARIS3237	2007-07-31 14:31	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/170211/tunisie-wikileaks-portrait-dune-diplomatie-francaise-soumise-au-regime->

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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA PUTS SARKOZY'S JULY 10-11 NORTH AFRICA
TRIP IN CONTEXT

REF: A. (A) TUNIS 949
[1](#)B. (B) ALGIERS 1004
[1](#)C. (C) RABAT 1128

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, for reas

ons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Sarkozy's first visit outside Europe July 10-11 to Algeria and Tunisia underscored his determination to proceed with his still vague Mediterranean Union initiative, establish his own relationships with the leaders in those countries, and pave the way for state visits in 2007 and 2008. Neither stop yielded much in the way of "deliverables." This was most apparent in Algeria, where images of Bouteflika's warm reception reportedly contrasted with disagreements over Sarkozy's refusal to atone publicly for the sins of France's colonial rule. Both sides agreed to suspend further work on a treaty of friendship started under President Chirac. An agreement on diplomatic visas contrasted with disappointment over a bilateral accord on civilian nuclear development and a lukewarm reception to the Mediterranean Union idea. In Tunisia, Sarkozy dealt with the sensitive issue of human rights himself in private meetings and limited press statements even at the risk of sending a mixed message in terms of his break with his more tolerant predecessor. Tunisian leaders voiced greater enthusiasm for the Mediterranean Union, which, according to our MFA interlocutors, reflects profound unhappiness over the Barcelona Process. The GOF was unhappy about Morocco's last-minute cancellation of what would have been the third leg of the North African tour but plans to proceed with a state visit there in October. End summary

¶2. (C) We spoke recently to the French MFA's Algeria and Tunisia/Libya desk officers about President Sarkozy's July 10-11 visits. As noted in refs A and B, the visit was more of a symbolic opportunity to get to know the respective leaders and lay down some preliminary markers for formal state visits to follow in late 2007 and possibly early 2008. The much ballyhooed but little understood Mediterranean Union idea also featured in the discussions both to ensure the leaders had some conception of the proposal as well as understood Sarkozy's personal commitment to implementing his still inchoate vision of what France hopes will be an important regional grouping.

Algeria: Forget the Past -- Please

¶3. (C) Algeria desk officer Jay Dharmadhikari provided an elaborate overview of the framework in which France places its bilateral relationship with Algeria, stressing how it is divided into consular (especially visas), security, economic/commercial, and political dossiers. In the context of the visit, however, he stressed that Presidents Sarkozy and Bouteflika got into little detail and did not accomplish a great deal in terms of concrete deliverables.

--Visas: As noted in ref B, Paris eased visa restrictions for diplomatic passport holders but insisted on holding the line for everyone else (including "service" passport holders who include military and security as well as other government personnel). France has very little leeway, he explained, vis-a-vis the other Schengen partners, which always rankles the Algerians. The most France could do was promise to "study" the matter further.

--France's colonial legacy/treaty of friendship: An essential point in Sarkozy's visit to Algiers was repeating as president his contention that France and Algeria needed to put the past behind them as much as possible. This meant no French "repentance" for past sins dating back to the colonial period. Dharmadhikari underscored that Bouteflika and other Algerians expressed their view that France should not expect to wipe the slate clean and move on. Although French media made much of the reputed "burial" of what became in Chirac's last two years a controversial draft friendship treaty between France and Algeria, Dharmadhikari said only that the treaty is on indefinite hold and could be revived later should conditions warrant. (Comment: We note that Sarkozy's "no repentance" line resurfaced in a speech he gave in Dakar July 26 that, inter alia, urged all Africans to look beyond their sense of grievance over the colonial past and focus on

the real problems that confront them today. End comment)

--Economic/commercial ties: One of France's longstanding priorities with Algeria, according to Dharmadhikari, is promoting commercial and investment ties. He complained, however, that French businesses continue to have problems with bureaucratic red tape and other institutional and non-institutional barriers to conducting business. Reform,

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especially where it applies to reviewing and revising protectionist regulations and retooling inadequate judicial mechanisms for dispute resolution, remains a slow and uncertain process. When asked how much assistance France provides to help Algeria in these and related fields (such as assistance for WTO accession), Dharmadhikari demurred, indicating that virtually all French assistance flows through the EU so that aid is delivered multilaterally.

--Civilian nuclear development: Dharmadhikari acknowledged that France did not get very far pushing its desire to sell civilian nuclear equipment to Algeria on this trip. He faulted inadequate preparation for the visit (presumably on the Algerian side) more than Algerian disinterest in the idea. Dharmadhikari noted our signature of an accord recently with the Algerians and hoped that the USG and GOF could consult formally about nuclear cooperation with Algeria.

--Western Sahara and Boutef's health: During the meeting between the presidents, the emotional subject of France's colonial legacy kept coming up along with the desire to continue cooperating closely on security issues (primarily terrorism). On the Western Sahara, Dharmadhikari stated that Bouteflika complained about France's tilt in Morocco's favor but Sarkozy refused to be drawn into a detailed discussion of the subject and insisted the substance of French policy had not fundamentally changed. Bouteflika seemed relatively healthy and engaged, though not enough to alter Paris' view that he will be lucky to survive to the end of his current term in 2009.

--The Mediterranean Union idea, Dharmadhikari confirmed, did not excite the Algerians. He characterized their reaction as lukewarm but not dismissive. Dharmadhikari opined that Algeria's reaction was based on a realistic calculation that such a grouping made no sense and would not work as long as Moroccan/Algerian ties were so antagonistic. Dharmadhikari further thought that Algeria was being true to its tendency not to favor any gathering or international initiative that it was neither leading nor instigating.

--Reinforcing the relationship's "political direction:" One positive outcome from the visit Dharmadhikari cited was agreement by the two presidents that the intergovernmental mechanisms handling the details of the bilateral relationship needed to be reinforced. Specifically, the two sides agreed that their respective prime ministers would oversee the work of their ministries and thus give a political aspect to the functional work they undertook. This should provide better accountability and ensure that the state visit expected in November truly delivers concrete results (such as an agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation).

Tunisia: All Smiles and Some Nervousness

14. (C) Tunisia/Libya desk officer Christian Reigneaud had a less stressful time preparing Sarkozy's visit to Tunis. The Tunisians, he said, were warm and there were almost no contentious issues to discuss. Human rights was the exception, and in that sense the French delegation quickly picked up Tunisian nervousness about how Sarkozy, as opposed to Chirac, would deal with them. In the end, Reigneaud explained, Sarkozy exercised discretion in confining his most critical comments on human rights to his one-on-one with Ben Ali. Reigneaud claimed that Sarkozy did discuss specific

cases, including the subsequently released dissident lawyer Mohammed Abbou. (Comment: French newspapers reporting Abbou's release referred to reports that Sarkozy had raised his specific case while in Tunis. Interestingly, and perhaps partly because of the overwhelming and breathless coverage of France's role in the "Bulgarian medics" case and Sarkozy's visit to Libya, the GOF did not seek credit for Abbou's release. End comment) The general tenor of Sarkozy's general talking points to Ben Ali, Reigneaud assured us, were along the lines of "we do not want to see anything threaten Tunisia's internal stability but believe that Tunisia must be confident enough of its economic and social strengths to open up."

15. (C/NF) When asked about the one-on-one that Sarkozy had with Ben Ali, Reigneaud replied that it concerned problems France has encountered in its bilateral security cooperation. Tunisia had been upset about French security service contact with a prominent Tunisian dissident in exile (NFI) and believed French intelligence had provided support for his criticisms of Ben Ali and his family from France. Sarkozy set the record straight, and France was hoping this important liaison relationship, focused heavily on terrorism, would get back on track.

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16. (C) By contrast with the Algerians, Reigneaud described the Tunisians as "ecstatic" about the Mediterranean Union concept. This reflects disappointment with the Barcelona process, he explained, and possibly the desire to find a more solid anchor working principally with France than the EU to promote regional cooperation. Anything that would reduce the scope for the Nordics and other northern Europeans to complain about human rights was also something Tunisia welcomed.

17. (C) As with Algeria, the French are looking ahead to a yet-to-be finalized state visit in late 2007/early 2008. Reigneaud said the well-established bilateral commissions would start working on deliverables, and he thought Prime Minister Fillon and/or FM Kouchner would visit in the not too distant future.

Morocco: The Stop Not Made

18. (C) Dharmadhikari and Reigneaud confirmed the irritation at senior levels of the GOF over Morocco's request that Sarkozy not include Rabat in this tour. They gave all the reasons cited in ref C, most of which have come out in the French media. The last-minute nature of the cancellation was more irritating than the cancellation itself, according to our interlocutors. Dharmadhikari, who handles the Western Sahara portfolio, said the Moroccan decision reflected the sort of impulsive and arbitrary style the GOF has gotten used to from King Mohammed. It would have no long-term effects on that bilateral relationship, but it did serve as a firm reminder of the sensitivities France has to balance between Morocco and Algeria.

Comment

19. (C) Sarkozy's choice of the Maghreb as his first non-European trip as president surprised many but has been explained away by recalling that his desire to establish a Mediterranean Union was one of the specific things Sarkozy referred to in his statement immediately after being elected. Even though the union still seems more of an idea Sarkozy has been nursing for some time, and not a carefully thought-out vision (we are still not sure where this initiative is being handled bureaucratically in the GOF), he clearly wanted to be seen taking the concept to those leaders whose help he needs to bring it to life. Morocco's last-minute cancellation, therefore, was a setback to

Sarkozy's desire to be seen moving quickly to make good on one of his initiatives.

¶10. (C) In Algeria, the reality behind the smiles and warm interaction between Bouteflika and Sarkozy in front of the cameras was probably sobering but important. Sarkozy likely appreciates how much he has to make up for in terms of the damage done to France's ties with Algeria over the past two years. Nevertheless, Sarkozy's determination to look to the future and not dwell on the sins of France's colonial past cannot have gone over well with a veteran of the Algerian liberation struggle like Bouteflika. The state visit should reveal whether the two leaders' generational difference over this symbolic point translates into substantive obstacles to the better ties both say they want. In Tunisia, Sarkozy wanted to mark a break from the heavily personalized and much criticized relationship Chirac had with Ben Ali. His desire to keep the most contentious part of the bilateral relationship away from public view, however, inadvertently sent the wrong signal. His delegation snubbed Tunisia's independent civil society, and his state secretary for human rights was forced to endure ridicule in the French media for having been invisible in Tunis and only meeting the head of a Tunisian human rights group in Paris after the visit. Ben Ali and his cohorts, on the other hand, were probably relieved to have gotten off as lightly as they did and probably hope that the schizophrenia of the later Chirac years (Dousté-Blazy reputedly despised and would not visit Tunisia for its human rights record) will not be repeated. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

PEKALA